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THE THEOLOGICAL UTILITY OF THE CAESAR CULT

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In the well-known passage at the beginning of Seneca's *De Clementia*,¹ the philosopher pictures his ideal young emperor soliloquizing: "Have I been chosen from among all men to take the office of the gods upon earth? I am the arbiter of life and death to the nations; it lies in my hands to determine what every man's lot shall be; from my words cities and peoples derive their occasions of joy; no part of the world flourishes but by my favor"; etc.

A little later² Seneca proposes the monarch's golden rule: "He should be to the citizens as he wishes the gods to be to him."

Again: "The state would regard its ruler just as we should regard the immortal gods if they would permit us to see them, with reverent devotion."³

When a philosopher with a Seneca's talent for generalization, with the motive that we know to have been his, so elaborately addresses the head of an institution so new as the Roman principate still was—and one so curiously kept as this had hitherto been from any accurate appraisal—we should expect to see a certain development of the theory of the imperial function. Seneca is not hinting at actual divinity in Nero; indeed we may plausibly fancy that his ridicule, elsewhere, of the divinity of Nero's stepfather had something to do with Nero's comparative freedom from delusions of that kind in his own case. But these gravely complimentary admonitions of the almost superhuman power of the emperor's position take an especial significance from the contemporary doctrine of the imperial apotheosis—its ephemeral flatteries as well as the solid fact of the cult of the deified Augustus; for even in the former there are indications of a rising theory of the emperor's function like a reasoned scheme of a divinely ordered Providence. Was not, indeed, the cult of the Caesars, in

¹ *De Clem.* i. 1. 2.

² *Ibid.*, i. 7. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, i. 19. 8, fin.

spite of its superficial aspects, a logical and an actual factor in the transition from the earlier religion of capricious and conflicting powers of nature¹ to that of an orderly and ethical government of the universe, to a centralized theology?

The proposition needs to be distinguished from two or three matters closely related with it. It is not of the political utility of the worship of Rome and the emperors; Augustus' policy is now as amply recognized as the enduring reverence for the Eternal City which was largely its result. Nor are we speaking of the aid thus rendered in advance to the later development of the Roman ecclesiastical system; nor to what a historian of the church might perhaps call the divinely ordained convenience of the empire for the spread of Christianity. The present question is one of popular theology: whether the habit of worshipping the one great central power which had unified and ruled the visible world with general beneficence did not assist in orienting the common religious mind toward monotheism.

Recalling Boissier's fascinating chapter on *L'apothéose impériale*²—which has been the suggestion for much work since, and to which this paper would best seek to be considered a sort of footnote—I need not enumerate the many antecedent facts in legend and popular devotion and even philosophic theory which prepared people throughout the empire to accept the deification of a great emperor with general sincerity. Nor need we deal with the limitations of the case. Pliny's compliment to Trajan, repeated in many forms in the *Panegyric*, but summed up in the three words, "*Diis simillimus princeps*,"³ was doubtless about as far as it was possible to go among serious-minded gentlemen who were mutually acquainted. But even men like Seneca and Pliny may easily have felt that the imperial power and function, in the abstract, was a thing divine. The word "divine" is even yet ambiguous; and the ancient tendency to confuse ideas with the names of them is a commonplace. Divinity won by merit, "*immortalitas virtute parta*," in Livy's phrase,⁴ was but an added connotation of the idea of conditional immortality which was a favorite with the Stoics. The gods are not exclusive: "*non sunt di fastidiosi*, non

¹ Cf. Hor. *Od.* iii. 5, 1 ff.

² *La religion romaine*, Book I, chap. ii.

³ *Pan.* i. 3; cf. *ibid.*, iv. 4 and vii. 5.

⁴ *I.* vii. 15.

invidi; admittunt"—they are ready with a welcome—urged Seneca,¹ who was eclectic enough to take his divinity wherever he found it. His ridicule of the apotheosis of Claudius was chiefly at least because Claudius lacked the quality.

Contemporary literary comments upon the divinity of the Caesars, however, whether obviously insincere, or sardonic, or serious and stilted, furnish little in real answer to our question. The relation of a king to his people has always been an easy analogy for expressing the relation of a god to men; and the sight of a single ruler over the whole effective world furnished an analogy too obvious to be overlooked. So in a logical sense it is a peculiar coincidence which obtrudes itself, that the world-monarch was actually himself turned into a god and worshiped. The situation becomes more than an analogy; it becomes in effect a stepping-stone in popular theology. The fact to be considered lies essentially not in literature: it is largely beyond evidence; indeed it is hardly more convincing that we do find literary expression of it. Pliny in the *Panegyric*,² after describing ideally the functions of the emperor, continues: "Such, I should think, would be the government of the father of the world if ever he turned his attention to the earth and deigned to count the destinies of men among his divine affairs"—*Talia esse crediderim quae ipse mundi parens temperat nutu, si quando oculos demisit in terras, et jata mortalium inter divina opera numerare dignatus est*. Minucius Felix,³ arguing to prove that the divine Providence must be that of one god, not of many, cites by way of elementary illustration the superior efficiency of a unified government among men.

Clearly the deifying of a heroic figure simply as such was a very different thing in effect from the deifying of the one who represented the orderly government of the world. The logical implications of it are different. When we read, for example, that the people of Smyrna dedicated a shrine to Homer,⁴ or that Cornelia expected to be invoked as a divinity by her children after her death,⁵ or that the people of Lystra wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas,⁶ we are considering

¹ *Ep.* 73. 15.

³ *Octav.* xviii. 5.

² *Pan.* 80.

⁴ *Cic. Arch.* viii. 19.

⁵ *Nepos de Lat. hist.*; cf. Peter, *Hist. Rom. Frag.*, p. 222.

⁶ *Acts*, chap. 14.

religious phenomena that are merely symptomatic. But the popular worship of the emperor was a force for change in the current theological ideal. It was the only worship that was universal throughout the empire;¹ and the central authority of the *Pax Romana*, even as a man, was vice-gerent, as Seneca says, not of a god, but of the gods, —the aggregate of divinity. The special effectiveness of deifying the head of the empire lay in the fact that, to the provincial imagination, at any rate, it was all-embracing.

It is not to be maintained, of course, that this was the only or the main avenue from polytheism to monotheism. It was collateral to several influences. Not to speak of the momentous contribution of Judaism and Christianity, or the "Sol Invictus" of the Mithra cult, the intellect of the pagan world was gradually developing the doctrine of a supreme spirit, either under the name of Jupiter or more abstractly. But the common people certainly were not keeping up with the intellectual movement; and it is to the popular theology, the theology of the provincial, the unsophisticated, and the unlettered, whose confidence in the divine greatness of the head of the state was most complete, that this was fitted to perform the theological service of which I have spoken. To the general idea of a universe under the reign of law which succeeded the old idea of more or less lawless natural powers, the Stoic contribution was of course immense. But the Stoic statement of universal law in the abstract could hardly be popularized; comprehension of it in terms of the imperial function could be and was.

The deified emperor, considered individually, was but one addition to the overpopulous pagan pantheon which Lucian, for instance, satirizes so quaintly. Even the sainted Marcus Antoninus, whose cult was for a hundred years so popular that a man seemed radically irreligious if he had not Marcus' image in his domestic chapel,² was nevertheless only one of the company; only in a secondary way does his worship contribute to the systematic idea. But considered as the head of the empire, the imperial figure was a concrete illustration of the principle of a world-wide Providence. The habit of count-

¹ Cf. Duruy "Formation d'une religion officielle dans l'empire romain," Acad. des Sciences Mor. et Pol., *Comptes Rendus* (1880), 328 ff.

² Julius Capitolinus, *M. Ant.* 18.

ing upon such a Providence (even were it merely a human one) tended to detach men from the notion of a local deity for each neighborhood, or a special deity for each phenomenon, or a favorite god for each worshiper according to his taste. It helped to put the element of universality into the popular idea of divinity; just as the vagueness of distinction between deity and the highest humanity had aided in putting into that idea the element of ethical goodness, which was notoriously not an essential in the mythological concept of it.

It is a well-known fact that the worship of the separate emperors tended to concentrate itself in the worship of the imperial power collectively. The worship of Augustus was from the start combined with that of *Dea Roma*. The *sodalitates*¹ of the different emperors or imperial houses extended their duties variously from the cult of one emperor to that of another, and in the smaller local centers of the worship of the imperial power, the necessities of economy, apparently, as well as a sense of fitness, led to the combining of the worship of all the Caesars sometimes in a single temple. The local *Augustales* appear to have conducted the worship of all the *divi* in succession.

And to a considerable extent pagan religious interest gradually focused itself upon the Caesar cult. Persecution of the Christians narrowed itself down in many cases to the test of the refusal to worship the image of the emperor; and while this is easily accounted for on political grounds it tended to fix attention upon Caesar-worship as representative of pagan orthodoxy.

From what is known of the provincial assemblies and priesthoods it seems clear that the ranking priest of each province was the *flamen* or *sacerdos* of Rome and Augustus, elected by the assembly.² This was, as Boissier pointed out, the only priesthood that had no local limitation or local rivalry to contend with. In the reorganization of the pagan hierarchy under Maximin, these priests were given jurisdiction over the others;³ a fact which clearly indicates for the Caesar cult a predominant position.

In a curious passage in the apology of Saint Melito, bishop of

¹ Cf. Dessau, *Eph. Epig.* III. 205.

² Cf. Marquardt, *Eph. Epig.* I. 200.

³ Cf. Eusebius *Hist. Eccles.* viii. 14. 7; Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, 36; Julian, *Ep.* 63.

Sardis, to the emperor, M. Aurelius, he says of his contemporaries, "They worship the images of the Caesars more than they do their old gods."¹ Tertullian's remark is familiar: "You show more reverence to Caesar than you do to Jupiter; and reasonably, for a living Caesar is worth more than all the gods who are dead. . . . You more carelessly perjure yourselves by all the gods than by the genius of Caesar."² An *obiter dictum* of the emperor Julian, as he announced the punishment which he himself imposed upon an offending pagan priest is suggestive also: "Formerly in such a case the ancients used to invoke the curses of the gods; but that does not seem to me to be the best way, for the gods themselves nowhere appear to have attended to them."³

Probably the religious effect of the Caesar-worship was at its height about the time of the Antonines. The cult tended to secularization. Evidently it had gone far in this way when the Christian emperors could keep up the practice of canonization as *divi*; for this reason, with the religious meaning of the *sanctificatio* relegated to the background, it is hardly to be wondered at that the Christian fathers afford us scanty testimony that can be cited in support of the present thesis. And in the pagan revival in Julian's time the emphasis is upon the older style of paganism. But this was a professed reaction toward Hellenism, and before this time the theological utility, whatever it was, of the unifying cult of the Caesars was finished, and the various influences which tended to make men think in monotheistic forms had centered in a new faith.

¹ Quoted from the Latin translation of the Syrian original in Petra's *Specilegium Solesmense*, II, xli.

² *Apol.* 28.

³ *Ep.* 62, fin.